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WHAT THE UNIVERSITY EXPECTS OF HIGH-SCHOOL STUDENTS IN ENGLISH¹

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I do not think anybody would deny that the English work which is offered to us at the University and elsewhere is somewhat unfortunately joined so far as credit is concerned; that is to say, a student does work in composition and in literature, and however we try, and we all do try, to make those two correlate very closely, it follows unavoidably that they do not always correlate, and the work that a student does in composition and the work he does in literature are two fairly distinct things. I will regard them as so divided in considering what it seems to the department at the University we have a right to expect. And first let me speak of literature, not because it is either less or more important but because our ideas in regard to it are perhaps less likely to be agreed than are our expectations in English composition.

I had this conference in mind when I drew up the examination for the Seniors in the various high schools who were competing for a prize yesterday, and I tried to make the examination fair to the Seniors of the high schools while at the same time I made it, as far as literature was concerned, reasonably expressive of our point of view here concerning what a student ought to be able to get out of his high-school course in literature. If you will allow me I will read that examination and then use it as a kind of text for my remarks:

A. LITERATURE

- I. a) Why did the people of Pope's day think little of Shakespeare? Why has Shakespeare come into favor again since then?
- b) State what you know of the sources of any one of Shakespeare's plays.

¹ Read at the English Departmental Conference of Academies and Secondary Schools in Relations with the University of Chicago, November 12, 1910.

- II. What interests you when you read a novel? Illustrate, citing at least five novels.
- III. Name two English poets of the seventeenth, three of the eighteenth, and four of the nineteenth century. Name one work of each.
- IV. State very briefly the substance of either one of the *Idylls of the King*, or one of Milton's shorter poems, or of a long poem of any other poet except Shakespeare.

B. COMPOSITION

- I. What do you understand by "organization" in composition?

Write an outline for a composition of about 600 words on the general topic of "what one should expect to get from a high-school education that will be of value to him in life."

- II. Write two short papers of one hundred to one hundred and fifty words on your chief interest in school work and your chief interest outside.

Now what I had in mind when I framed that examination was this. In the first place, I speak for my department as a whole, though of course not for every individual member of the department, as far as I know, but I think I speak for many more than my own department here at the University as a whole—I think I speak for a good many people who are teaching college English, when I say, that so far as literature is concerned, if when a man or woman comes up here he has learned to read intelligently, and has some general idea of the substance of a certain very few important things, such as for example some general idea of the form of a play as it differs from that of a novel, some general idea of how the reading of poetry differentiates itself emotionally from the reading of prose, and some general idea of the substance of certain two or three or more—it makes no special difference—poems and pieces of prose which he can use as landmarks, more or less as nuclei around which his general knowledge of a period can cluster—if he has that, and if he has in addition to that as clear a knowledge, say, of the history of English literature in its relation to its own time as, let us say by way of illustration, he has of ancient history in general, if he has taken a course in that—if he has those three things, we do not care at all

what he has or has not read. He may have confined himself to Chaucer almost exclusively, he may have read nothing but Chaucer and *Silas Marner*; he may have confined himself to the nineteenth century; he may have read ten novels and one play, or ten plays and one novel; he may have done, in short, what he pleased, or rather what his instructor pleased. If he is able when he comes up to read intelligently, if he has a general idea of the history of English literature in relation to its time, and if he knows the difference between the structure of a novel and a play, and how a long poem differs from a short poem, and how to read poetry, we do not care whether he is able to give the meaning of a single obsolete work in any one of Shakespeare's plays, whether he can characterize Lady Macbeth, whether he knows the story of *Silas Marner*, whether he has read this or that or the other thing, what he has read or how much he has read. We are perfectly willing to leave all that to his instructor. That I think is our position.

Now I have conformed to the position of the secondary schools in this examination by asking one or two definite questions. For instance, I have put in the *Idylls of the King* because a good many students have read them. Again, I have put in the question on the sources of Shakespeare's plays, because they are a matter of curiosity to a great many students and are discussed by many instructors. But the questions that represent our own attitude are in general the other questions, the questions intended to show whether the student knows the difference of spirit at different epochs in the history of English. We want to know whether, when he reads, anything *definite* interests him; whether all he says is that "the plot interested me, and the wealth of characterization," or whether he knows specifically, as you and I know when we read a novel, what *particular* points interest. We want to know whether he remembers general history sufficiently—and no more than sufficiently—to be able to place in their proper positions a few of the great men of their time in English literature. And notice that question: two of the seventeenth, three of the eighteenth, four of the nineteenth century; it does not go back of the seventeenth century,

and it increases its demand as it comes on down toward the present time: which again is not meant to be final in any way, but indicative. I will venture to say again that further than that we do not go—we do not care whether the student has ever studied the “Speech on Conciliation” or not; we do not care, speaking generally, whether he has followed out the prescribed course of reading in one high school or another. We are willing to leave that entirely in the hands of the instructor, provided only that these very simple things be present. And they are simple, as you will admit, because we do not demand that the student burden his memory, as far as literature is concerned, with any but the largest and most important facts. We do not care whether he remembers the detail, or whether he ever had it. I think if the examination is read and if I make myself clear I may perhaps consider that matter for the moment closed. I fear that I shall be attacked on all sides, but I shall consider it closed for the moment, and pass on to what we require in composition.

We feel that we have a right to ask a reasonable understanding of the structure of the sentence. We do not feel that we have any right to expect the Freshman to write with entire grammatical accuracy. We do not fail a student for his use of hanging participles or split infinitives. Personally I do not even correct split infinitives in English 1—there is too much to do to bother about a thing of that sort. We do not fail a student because he makes occasionally those grammatical errors which one finds so properly anathematized in the textbooks. But we demand that a student should be able to recognize these errors when they are pointed out to him.

Now, for example, here is a type of sentence which we feel we cannot accept from students in the high school:

A salesman must never argue with a customer. He must always allow anything said by a customer to pass, but if something is said about a certain fashion seen in another store, that it is more up to date, or that it is better goods for less money, it is then for the salesman to use all the psychology which has come to him naturally and to use all his mental power gracefully and scientifically until he has completely knocked that notion out of the customer's head.

That is a sentence which we regard as much more unsound and unsafe than this, for example: "Going around the corner a post hit the horse which caused him to shy." I would pass a man who occasionally wrote such a sentence as this last, but never one who wrote such a sentence as the long one above, from which it is almost impossible to extract the meaning. If what the Freshman writes is gracefully phrased, so much the better—and we now and then get graceful phrasing. If it is clumsily phrased, so much the worse. But we do not fail a man if one can gather from his work with any precision what he means.

In the second place we demand from the student a certain ability to organize his ideas. My examination goes on, (1) What do you understand by organization? We consider that a student is not able to take English 1 if he is not able to see any reason for beginning a composition at one point rather than at another.

And, third, we feel that we have a right to ask for some understanding of coherence or transition, or call it what you please, in accordance with which a man in reading another's work is able to pass from sentence to sentence and from paragraph to paragraph without too great a jar.

The standard I presented yesterday is this: by the time a man leaves English 1 he must be able to express himself with sufficient clearness, intelligence, and accuracy in his other courses to do himself justice in those courses, and in what he says fairly to represent what he wants to say. That we should demand entire grammatical accuracy, or more than a narrow vocabulary, or such a background of cultural tradition as enables one to write with emotional fervor and delight, is of course immensely far from our idea.

That is what we demand in composition, and what we feel—perhaps you think arbitrarily—that we have a right to demand.

The way of combining these things we leave entirely to the instructor. If one wants to learn how to organize his ideas, many instructors feel that he cannot do better than study Burke's "Speech on Conciliation." If the teacher thinks so, well; we

will examine the student on organization, but we do not care how much he knows about the contents of the speech itself.

Do not imagine for a moment that I am belittling literature as such, and that I am trying to throw the emphasis on composition exclusively, to the excision of literature. The instructor knows how far the class is able to go emotionally in the appreciation of literature. He may teach one class with emphasis on the facts, or on the meaning of particular words, another with emphasis on the source of the novel or drama, another with emphasis on its individual characters. But we shall not examine the student on any one of those three things. When a student reads a novel today, does he know what he is interested in, and—this is what we should like, although we too seldom get it—does he still, after his training in high school, retain any interest in literature, in reading at all? So far as we are concerned, you may teach what you please in literature, within a very wide range. Those of you who send students East to college must teach certain things. But most of you send your students to college in the West, and there they are not examined on the particular literature which they have studied. We take your word that whatever you have asked them they have done satisfactorily. Only, we occupy the same position in the University that you occupy in the high schools, and for that reason we have to maintain a perfectly definite standard. If we allow a pupil to pass through our required courses who cannot write intelligently and efficiently, then we hear from it, and that hearing we are anxious to obviate.

In this connection I should like to add—because some of you may not know it, and your students may have difficulty about it—a few words on our methods of handling in English composition students who come up here. They come accredited to the University, and that accreditation we accept, but during the first week we test them constantly in and out of class, to see how efficient they are in composition. In accordance with their efficiency, we divide them into sections, some of which we call English 0 and some English 1, and in those sections they gain further practice. In English 0 they are trained in what we

regard as more elementary matters than those which they take up in English 1, and if they show in those sections the same standard of efficiency which we require of students who are to pass from English 1, then we give them the same credit as those in English 1. That a man is put into English 0 means that he probably will not get credit for English 1, but not necessarily so. Into English 2, the next quarter, go the better students of English 0 and the poorer students of English 1. There they meet and complete their credit for English 1.

In brief, then, all we ask of the student when he comes up, so far as literature is concerned, is that he should be able to read intelligently, and that he should know about as much of English literature in relation to its time as he may be expected to remember of ancient history; in composition, that he should be able to make his meaning clear with some precision; whether clumsily or gracefully, we do not hold you responsible.

We have no way of testing the number from whom we get this power and knowledge in literature. About 4 per cent of the students who enter Freshman English composition we give credit to at once, on the basis of their obviously excellent training. On the other hand, perhaps 20 per cent are so inefficient in English that they do not complete it in one quarter. About 13 per cent are put into English 0, and so take two quarters or even more for the completion of their first major in English, and fully 7 per cent of these who continue in English 1 are nevertheless failed or conditioned at the end of the first quarter.